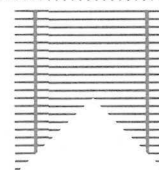


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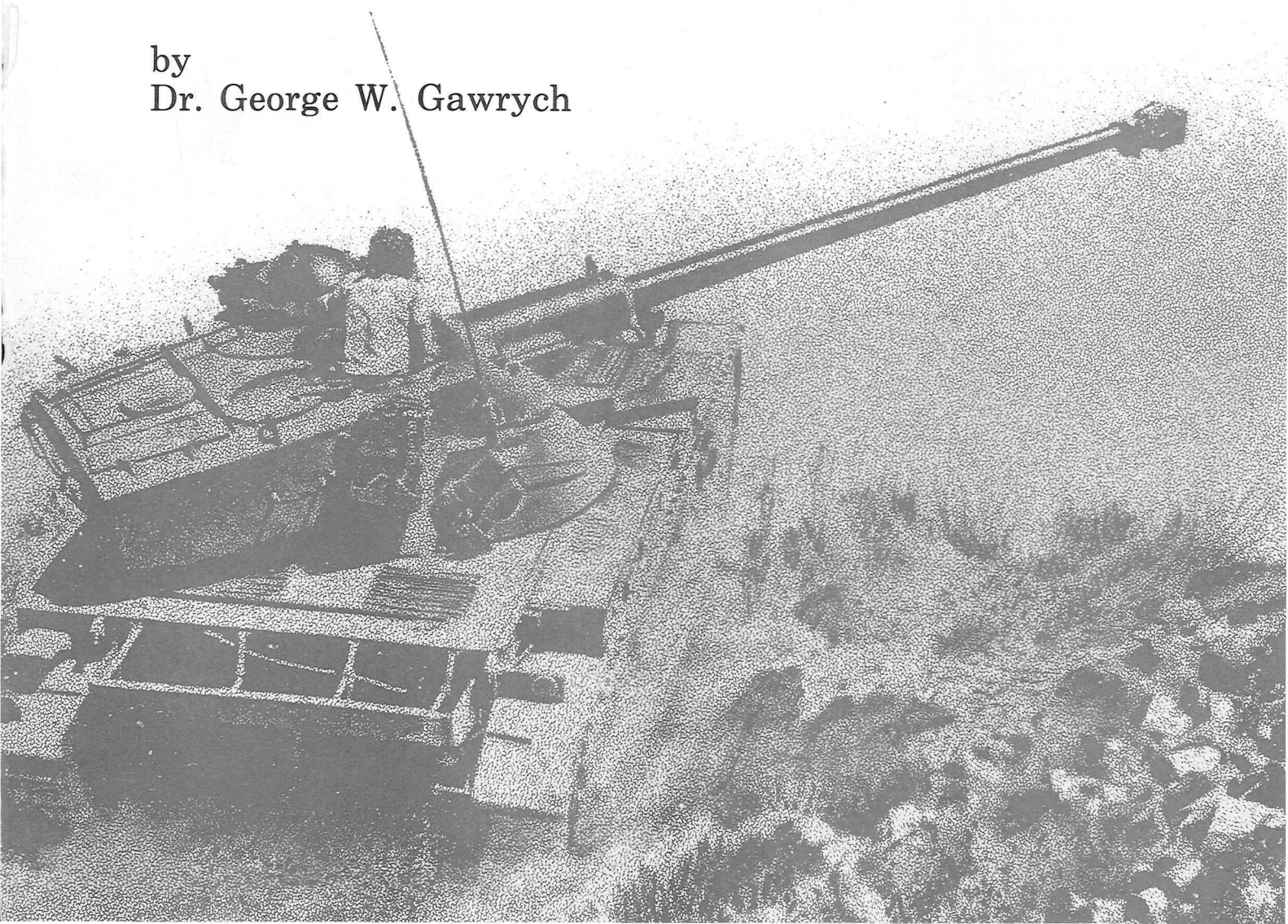
Research Survey No. 7



Key to the Sinai:

The Battles for Abu Ageila in the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli Wars

by
Dr. George W. Gawrych



FOREWORD

Situated between the Suez Canal and Israel and marked by the harsh environment of the central Sinai lies Abu Ageila, an unprepossessing area of low ridges and hills through which passes the best-surfaced road in the peninsula. Owing to its location on the central route, close to the Israeli-Egyptian border, Abu Ageila became the key to the Sinai in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1956 and 1967. The struggle for this barren land in two wars provides an epic story of battle and reveals the influence of experience on the preparation for and conduct of war.

In both the 1956 and 1967 wars, Abu Ageila was the main gateway to the Sinai for the Israel Defense Forces. Yet, as Dr. George W. Gawrych demonstrates, there were marked differences between Egyptian and Israeli war plans, preparations, operations, and results in the two battles for the area. In 1956, Israel carried the burden of a constricting alliance with Britain and France and faced other extensive military problems. The result was that Israel fought a difficult and costly battle for Abu Ageila. In contrast, in 1967, the Israel Defense Forces developed a brilliant operational plan and achieved effective unit command and control and attained a decisive victory.

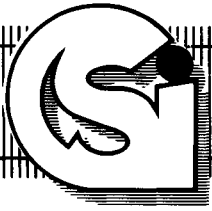
Based on extensive research, including personal interviews with Israeli commanders and briefings by Egyptian military historians, *Key to the Sinai* is a crisp battle narrative of desert warfare and a systematic historical analysis of two armies confronting the changing terms of battle. Students of AirLand Battle doctrine will find reading this Research Survey a stimulus to meeting the challenges of modern warfare.



RICHARD M. SWAIN
Colonel, Field Artillery
Director, Combat Studies Institute

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INTRODUCTION

Between the 1956 and 1967 wars, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) underwent a professionalization and maturation that culminated in the brilliant victory of the Six Day War. In 1956, the IDF had failed to defeat decisively the Egyptian Army in battle: the Egyptians withdrew from the Sinai only after the British and French had commenced their bombardment of Egyptian airfields in support of Israeli operations. Eleven years later, however, the Israelis single-handedly defeated the combined armed forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria on three fronts. With the Israeli occupation of the Sinai, Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights, Israel increased its size fourfold. In terms of maneuver warfare and deep operations, the most impressive victory occurred on the Sinai front in 1967. There, in only four days, the Israelis defeated an Egyptian force of 100,000 men and 900 tanks by employing a detailed plan based on the synchronization of division and brigade operations.

This study analyzes the reasons behind the stunning Israeli success in the Sinai by focusing on the 1956 and 1967 battles of Abu Ageila. Although scrutiny of these two battles fails to explain everything, a critical analysis of them does provide new insights concerning the IDF's preparedness, operational planning, and tactical execution in each conflict. In both wars, Abu Ageila constituted the key Egyptian defensive position in the eastern Sinai. The Israelis experienced numerous problems at Abu Ageila in the 1956 Sinai campaign and after four days abandoned their assault. Based in part on lessons derived from the 1956 experience, the IDF made numerous changes during the interwar years that led to a dramatically different outcome in 1967. In the second war, the Israelis seized Abu Ageila in less than twenty-four hours in an exemplary night operation that employed combined arms.

Although analysis in this work focuses on the IDF, the Egyptian Army also receives considerable attention. In this regard, the 1967 battle is most instructive, for the Egyptian Army's internal problems came to a head at Abu Ageila, their strongest defensive position in the Sinai.

A Note on Sources

A study of this nature poses certain difficulties for the historian. Although the passage of time is sufficient to permit a reasonable perspective on the events of 1956 and 1967, not enough time has elapsed to persuade Egypt and Israel to open their military archives to foreign researchers. Nonetheless, this study has benefited from the willingness of some officers and scholars to discuss the military past in ways that allow a reexamination of previous analyses of both engagements.

Much of the early published literature on the Arab-Israeli wars and on the battles of Abu Ageila is of an impressionistic, journalistic bent, written in the immediate aftermath of one of the conflicts. Subsequent analyses of the Arab-Israeli wars have tended to echo earlier descriptions and interpretations without critically reevaluating assumptions and data. In short, the field suffers from an acute shortage of serious and intensive studies of military operations concerning the Arab-Israeli wars.

To obtain detailed information on the battles of Abu Ageila, I traveled to Israel and Egypt in late 1986. The IDF, although declining to offer official assistance, permitted me to interview former Israeli commanders, who proved quite willing to discuss their involvement in both battles. I then used primary and secondary Israeli literature to gauge the value of the information I obtained in these interviews—which occurred some twenty to thirty years after the action.

In Egypt, in response to questions I submitted in advance, Egyptian military historians (with the ranks of brigadier general and colonel) briefed me using archival materials as their reference. In a subsequent meeting, we discussed specific points that had emerged during our earlier discussions. The Egyptian senior officers were candid in discussing their major mistakes in the 1956 and 1967 battles, and this candor has allowed me to make a critical and comprehensive examination of the subject.

Egyptian authorities requested that the names of individuals and the organizations involved in the briefings not be divulged in this study. Consequently, the information obtained from the Egyptians appears in the footnotes as "Official Egyptian Military Sources" or "*OEMS*." Although the Egyptian military declined permission for me to conduct personal interviews with retired senior officers or to visit the site of Abu Ageila, I have profited greatly from the personal accounts of a number of former Egyptian generals, in particular those of the chief of the General Staff and the front commander in the 1967 war. These memoirs, in Arabic, add perspective to the official position of the Egyptian Armed Forces today.
